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7 December 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM : Robert M. Gates

SUBJECT : Nitze Report

1. Attached is Paul Nitze's final report on Soviet perceptions of the ability of their strategic forces to carry out their missions. It is an interesting report, but one which is primarily quantitative and couched in terms more congenial to the systems analyst than to the specialist on Soviet affairs. At the outset, we agreed this project would pay for itself if it only identified key gaps in our knowledge. It has done that and more.

2. That said, there still are substantial problems in the analysis. I find myself, for example, in general agreement with NFAC's comments (which I also have attached to this memo) and would make the additional points:

-- Beyond the stated assumptions of the authors, there is a Team B mindset at work in the study that is not supported by the numbers or evidence and the implications of which are important. For example, on page 10, the report states "The strategic superiority now enjoyed by the USSR is conditional, not absolute." There are many who would argue that in a report purportedly reflecting Soviet perceptions it is not consistent with the evidence to allege that the Soviets have "strategic superiority," even conditional. Indeed, one could argue that from the Soviet standpoint, combining the military forces (strategic or conventional) of all of the USSR's enemies would confront the Soviet Union with a fairly daunting prospect (especially since the Soviets, as the report itself states, consider a broader range of capabilities as strategic than do we and also do not differentiate between, e.g., the US, UK and France). Nevertheless, this mindset to the problem tends to run throughout the report and probably skews the outcome of the analysis even more in the Soviet's favor.

-- The question of the U.S. role, will and capabilities in Soviet calculations is too often minimized. For example, on page 15, the report states "Soviet military strength generally, and particularly power projection capabilities, have permitted the Soviet Union to engage itself in various Third-World areas...

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with little or no effective U. S. opposition." I would argue that Soviet expansionism in the Third World since 1975 owes less to growing Soviet military strength than to U. S. inaction following our disastrous experience in Vietnam--a view their activism in the early 60s in the Third World tends to substantiate. Improvements in certain areas of Soviet military, such as airlift and the navy, have facilitated their growing role in the Third World but have not been responsible for it.

-- I have some problems with their use of evidence. For example,

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Perhaps more importantly is the reliance in discussing Soviet military doctrine and policy on Soviet writings in open literature and in some classified military journals. I would argue that this literature gives us a great deal of information about Soviet military science but does not provide a great deal of insight into Soviet military policy--that is, the views on these matters of the Soviet Union's most senior political officials. While the writings on military science, combined with exercise information and other sources, are about all we have and must be used, we should be wary about making a "leap of faith" that what we read in these writings also is an accurate reflection of views held by Brezhnev, Kirilenko, Tikhonov, and Ustinov. That would be like saying that SAC exercises and the views of professors/students at the National War College accurately convey the views of Ronald Reagan, Weinberger, Haig and Casey. We need to keep our perspective.

-- Another example of an unsubstantiated presumption is found on page 17, where it is stated "Assuming that the Soviets can enforce a relatively quick, even if bloody, termination of the Polish crisis, one can predict the patterns of behavior that the Soviets are likely to follow in the 1980s." I would contend that one cannot at all make that kind of an assumption, particularly to the extent that it flies in the face of the experience of the last year. Nevertheless, a view of how the Soviets conduct their national security affairs, including the attitudes they bring to questions of nuclear war, are premised in substantial ways in this report on such assumptions.

-- Insufficient prominence is given to conclusions in the report which have a critical bearing on understanding the quantitative assessments that are made. To wit, the paper acknowledges on page 50 that there are "important areas for which we have no tangible appreciation of the Soviet understanding of U. S. posture. These areas are critical inputs into any nuclear exchange simulations...." One might include among these areas

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their likely poor understanding of how the U. S. political leadership would respond in the scenarios set forth. The Soviets have acknowledged on countless occasions how this country and its leaders continue to baffle them. I believe this uncertainty would weigh heavily in their calculations and in how they might plan for nuclear conflict.

3. Despite important shortcomings, some of which are noted above, this report is very worthwhile. It does present some new insights; it does represent a different way of looking at the strategic equation, particularly from the Soviet standpoint, and in these terms is successful; and, perhaps most importantly, it identifies specific gaps in our intelligence to which both analysts and collectors can now turn high priority attention. The Nitze project was an experiment, and while it may have serious substantive flaws, as an experimental effort it makes a useful contribution.

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